**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT EIKEV**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Eikev begins with Moshe assuring *Benei Yisrael* that in reward for their observance of the Torah’s laws, God would bless them with prosperity, health, children, and triumph over enemy nations. These rewards are promised “*eikev tishme’un*” – “because you will obey” God’s laws (or “as a result of your obeying”).

Rashi, based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, famously associates the word “*eikev*” with the word “*akeiv*” – “heel,” and thus explains that Moshe alludes here to “the ‘light’ *mitzvot* which a person treads upon with his heels.” Meaning, these rewards are promised in particular for the observance of those commands which people tend to neglect and not take very seriously.

Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro of Piacezna, speaking to Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto in 5701/1941 (printed in *Eish Kodesh*, Parashat Eikev), suggested an additional insight into the connection between the word “*eikev*” in this verse and the “heel.” He said that this verse might be alluding to periods when the Torah and its laws are being trampled upon, when oppression and persecution make it all but impossible to properly observe the Torah’s commandments. The verse continues, “*u-shmartem va-asitem otam*” (literally, “and you observe and perform them”), which the Piacezner Rebbe suggested interpreting to mean, “and you yearn to perform them.” (The root *sh.m.r.* can be used to mean “anticipate,” as in the Torah’s description in Sefer Bereishit of Yaakov anticipating when Yosef’s dreams would be fulfilled – “*ve-aviv* ***shamar*** *et ha-davar*.”) At a time when the *mitzvot* are being “trampled” and thus become inaccessible, we must, at very least, feel a genuine sense of longing and yearning, and truly wish to fulfill the *mitzvot* that are currently beyond our reach.

This message is relevant not only to times of oppression, but also in regard to whatever limitations we confront. Even if we feel unable to devote the amount of time and energy we ideally should be devoting to learning and *mitzvot*, and even if we feel incapable of adhering to the standards that we ideally should achieve, we must at very least experience “*u-shmartem*” – a sincere yearning and desire to reach higher levels, rather than complacently feel content with our current standing.

(Interestingly, two years after the Rebbe of Piacezna put this address into writing, in 5703/1943, he added a note – which was included in the publication of his discourses delivered in the Warsaw Ghetto – clarifying that he presented these words to his followers at a time when there was still hope, when it was still possible to yearn for opportunities to properly observe *mitzvot*, and when it was thus relevant to admonish the people not to fall into despair and complacency. Two years later, however, the devastation and suffering were so severe that it was no longer possible to experience this sense of longing and aspiration. By that point, he lamented, only God’s redemption could heal the people’s wounded hearts so they could begin to rebuild religious life. The Rebbe recognized that when his audience was no longer receptive to religious admonition, when there was no possibility of such words having any effect upon the people’s hearts, it is best not to admonish, and to instead express sympathy, support and encouragement. He was killed by the Nazis several months later, in the autumn of 1943.)

Sunday

In Parashat Eikev, Moshe recounts the events following the sin of the golden calf, describing how he broke the stone tablets upon seeing the people worshipping the calf (9:17), and then petitioned God on their behalf, begging Him to forgive them. God accepted Moshe’s prayers, and proceeded to command him, “Go chisel two new stone tablets, like the first ones, and come up the mountain to Me, and make for yourself a wooden ark” (10:1). He then informed Moshe that He would engrave upon the new tablets the same words that He had engraved on the first tablets, and Moshe should then place them in the ark he constructed.

The commentators debate the question of whether this ark is the same ark that was placed inside the *Mishkan*, as we read in Sefer Shemot (25:25:10-22). Rashi, based on the Midrash (*Tanchuma*, 10), explains that this was a different ark, which God instructed Moshe to build so he would have where to store the new tablets until the permanent ark would be built. Once the permanent ark was built, the tablets were placed in the new ark. That new ark was permanently kept inside the *Mishkan* – and, later, inside the *Beit Ha-mikdash* – whereas the other ark was brought with *Benei Yisrael* when they went out to battle. Rashi writes that when *Benei Yisrael* brought the ark with them in their ill-fated war against the *Pelishtim*, when the ark was captured and the *Mishkan* in Shilo was destroyed (Shemuel I, chapter 4), this marked an exceptional case when the soldiers brought the ark from the *Mishkan* to the battlefield – for which they were gravely punished. Another exception is noted by Tosafot (Eiruvin 63b), who make reference to *Benei Yisrael*’s war against Amon, during which King David committed the sin with Batsheva. Uriya, Batsheva’s husband, refused to go home during the war despite being granted special permission by the king, explaining that it would be inappropriate to spend the night with his wife while the ark was in the battlefield (Shemuel II 11:11). Tosafot explain that this was an exceptional instance when the ark from the *Mishkan* was brought with the troops to battle. In any event, according to Rashi, there were two arks – one which generally remained inside the *Mishkan*, and another which was taken out to battle.

The Ramban, however, notes that this represents the minority opinion of Reish Lakish, cited by the Yerushalmi (Shekalim 6:1), whereas according to the majority opinion, there was only a single ark. After all, the Ramban asks, if there were two separate arks, then what was the first used for after the second ark was built and the tablets were placed in it? As the Ramban himself acknowledges, the answer is given by Reish Lakish in the Yerushalmi – that the first ark was used to house the *shivrei luchot* – the broken pieces of the first tablets which Moshe brought from Mount Sinai and shattered upon seeing the worship of the golden calf. However, the Ramban notes that the Gemara, in several contexts (Bava Batra 14b, Menachot 99a), speak of the *shivrei luchot* being stored together with the second set of *luchot* in the ark which was in the Temple. The *shivrei luchot* seem to have been stored in the same ark as the second tablets, not in a separate ark, calling into question Reish Lakish’s opinion.

The simplest answer, seemingly, is that the passages in the Gemara that describe the *shivrei luchot* being stored together with the second tablets reflect the majority view in the Yerushalmi, which does not accept Reish Lakish’s opinion, that there were two arks. However, Tosafot, both in Masekhet Eiruvin (63b) and in the *Da’at Zekeinim* commentary here in Parashat Eikev, suggest reconciling Reish Lakish’s view with the Gemara’s statement that the *shivrei luchot* were stored in the Temple together with the second tablets. They explain that once the permanent Temple was built in Jerusalem, the *shivrei luchot* were moved from the ark in which they had been stored into the ark in the *Mikdash*, where they permanently remained. The two-ark system was in place only until the building of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, at which point the *shivrei luchot* and second tablets were stored together, for all time.

Regardless, the Ramban interprets this verse here in Parashat Eikev differently. In his view, when Moshe recalls God instructing him, “and you shall make a wooden ark,” this refers to the command to construct the *Mishkan*. Upon announcing His forgiveness for the sin of the golden calf, God informed Moshe that His earlier command to construct a *Mishkan* was once again relevant, now that the people were forgiven for their sin. Moshe mentioned this in brief by recalling the command to build an *aron*, since the *aron* was, in the Ramban’s words, “the primary objective of the entire *Mishkan*.” According to the Ramban, then, Moshe speaks here of the lone ark which was kept in the *Mishkan*, and his point is that in response to his pleas, God informed him that *Benei Yisrael* should now proceed with the project to construct a site where He would dwell among them.

Monday

Yesterday, we discussed the verse in Parashat Eikev (10:1) which mentions God’s command to Moshe to construct a wooden ark at the time he prepared the second set of tablets upon which God engraved the Ten Commandments. Rashi, following the view of Reish Lakish brought by the Yerushalmi (Shekalim 6:1), explains that the ark mentioned here is not the ark which was kept inside the *Mishkan*, and then, later, in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Rather, this ark was built to temporarily store the new tablets which Moshe chiseled, until the construction of the ark that was placed in the *Mishkan*. Afterwards, according to this view (as explained by Tosafot in Eiruvin 63b, and in *Da’at Zekeinim* to this verse), the ark was used to store the *shivrei luchot* – the chards of the original tablets, which Moshe broke upon seeing *Benei Yisrael* worshipping the golden calf. The Gemara in a number of places speak of the *shivrei luchot* being stored together with the second set of tablets in the ark in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, which perhaps represents the majority view, which maintained that there was only a single ark. However, Tosafot suggested that even according to Reish Lakish, once the *Beit Ha-mikdash* was built, the *shivrei luchot* were transferred to the ark in the *Mikdash*, and the other ark was no longer used.

Interestingly, the Torah itself makes no mention of the *shivrei luchot*. The simple understanding is that once Moshe shattered the tablets, the pieces were left on the ground, and never retrieved. The concept of *shivrei luchot*, that the broken pieces of the initial tablets were preserved, is not stated outright in the text, but is inferred from different sources, as discussed by the Gemara in Masekhet Bava Batra (14a-b). Rabbi Yehuda reaches this conclusion – ironically enough – from the verse in Sefer Melakhim I (8:9) which states that there was nothing in the ark other than the second set of stone tablets. A seemingly superfluous word in the verse (“*Ein ba-aron* ***rak*** *shenei luchot ha-avanim*”) indicated to Rabbi Yehuda that there was, in fact, something additional in the ark – namely, the *shivrei luchot*, the broken remains of the original stone tablets which Moshe broke. Rabbi Meir, by contrast, finds an allusion to the *shivrei luchot* in Parashat Eikev, where Moshe recalls God commanding him to carve a second pair of stone tablets and then saying, “I shall write upon the tablets the words which were on the first tablets **which you broke, and you shall place them in the ark**” (10:2). The phrase “which you broke and you shall place them in the ark” could be read as alluding to the broken pieces of the original tablets being stored in the ark, along with the second tablets.

Regardless, what might be the significance of this concept, that the *shivrei luchot* were preserved and placed alongside the final set of tablets? Why did *Chazal* insist that the chards of the broken tablets were not just left at the foot of Mount Sinai, but were instead taken and stored for eternity, given the same prominence as the second set of tablets, which remained intact?

Perhaps, *Chazal* sought to convey a powerful lesson about the proper perspective on mistakes and failure, by using the symbol of the *shivrei luchot* – which represent one of the gravest failures in the history of *Am Yisrael*. The Gemara in Masekhet Gittin (36b) compares the sin of a golden calf to a bride who betrays her new husband at her wedding, as *Benei Yisrael* worshipped a foreign deity right there at Mount Sinai, the very place where they had entered into a covenant with the Almighty. We might have assumed that a failure of this magnitude completely erased the impact and value of the initial *Matan Torah*, that the shattering of the tablets signified the “shattering” of the experience of the Revelation at Sinai. But *Chazal* perhaps wished for us to view the sin of the golden calf from a more positive angle. The preservation of the *shivrei luchot* might indicate that notwithstanding *Benei Yisrael*’s failure, some effects of the original *Matan Torah* still remain. Although that *Matan Torah* did not succeed, and the covenant needed to be forged anew, represented by the second set of tablets, nevertheless, some remnants of that experience are still felt. The tragic failure did not entirely erase the impact of the Revelation. (Indeed, we still celebrate Shavuot as the day commemorating the original *Matan Torah* – even though that *Matan Torah* ended with the golden calf and the shattering of the tablets.)

If so, then the preservation of the *shivrei luchot* demonstrates that unsuccessful efforts are not wasted efforts. If we tried and strived to reach a certain goal, then even if that goal was not reached, the efforts were not for naught. Even the “*shivrei luchot*” – the frustrated efforts, the work that did not yield the desired results – have value and are worthy of being stored inside the ark. Even if our plans did not materialize, we should not retroactively regard the time and effort invested as having been wasted. As we work to build our “*Mikdash*,” a life of meaning, sanctity and fulfillment, we will, invariably, find ourselves with both “*luchot*” and “*shivrei luchot*” – successes alongside failures. Both were stored together in the ark to teach us that both are valuable, that even our unsuccessful efforts are significant, insofar as they constitute an integral part of the lifelong process of pursuing achievement and excellence.

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted the different views cited by the Gemara in Masekhet Bava Batra (14a-b) as to the source of the notion that the *shivrei luchot* – the shattered pieces of the first stone tablets which Moshe broke upon seeing *Benei Yisrael* worshipping the golden calf – were preserved. The Torah makes no mention of these chards being preserved, but *Chazal* understood that they were stored in the ark alongside the final set of tablets. Rabbi Meir found an allusion to the *shivrei luchot* in a verse in Parashat Eikev (10:2), in which Moshe recalls God forgiving the people for the sin of the golden calf and then commanding Moshe to carve new tablets, adding, “I shall write upon the tablets the words which were on the first tablets **which you broke, and you shall place them in the ark**.” This phrase “which you broke and you shall place them in the ark” could be read to mean that the broken tablets were placed in the ark, thus providing a textual allusion for the notion that the broken pieces of the original tablets were kept in the ark alongside the second set of tablets.

As the Gemara discusses, Rabbi Yehuda inferred this concept from a different verse (Melakhim I 8:9). Rabbi Yehuda did not accept Rabbi Meir’s inference from this verse in Parashat Eikev, the Gemara explains, because he makes a different inference from this phrase. The words “*asher shibarta*” (“which you broke”), according to Rabbi Yehuda, should be read to mean, “*yiyasher kochakha she-shibarta*” – congratulating Moshe for his bold decision to throw the stone tablets on the ground in response to the sight of the golden calf. These were sacred stones, hewn and engraved by God Himself, and it is less than obvious that shattering them was the appropriate response to the situation. According to Rabbi Yehuda, God expressed His approval to this controversial decision with the words “*asher shibarta*,” which may be read as congratulating Moshe. For this reason, he did not follow Rabbi Meir’s reading, which interprets this phrase differently.

It clearly emerges from the Gemara’s discussion that Rabbi Meir did not accept this interpretation of “*asher shibarta*,” from which he made a much different inference. We might therefore surmise that in Rabbi Meir’s view, God did not congratulate Moshe for breaking the tablets. He perhaps felt that God did not approve of this decision, that Moshe acted incorrectly in this regard.

In analyzing this debate, we might consider drawing a link between this question and a different debate between Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehuda. Later in Sefer Devarim (14:1), Moshe pronounces to *Benei Yisrael*, “You are children of the Lord your God.” The Gemara in Masekhet Kiddushin (36a) cites Rabbi Yehuda as qualifying this pronouncement, claiming that we are considered God’s children only when we act like His children (“*bi-zman she-atem nohagim minhag banim*”), meaning, when we obey His wishes. Rabbi Meir disagreed, arguing that “*bein kakh u-vein kakh atem keruyim banim*” – we are worthy of being called God’s children regardless of our conduct. To support this contention, Rabbi Meir cites several verses that refer to *Benei Yisrael* as God’s children even when they are sharply condemned for sins they committed. For example, in the famous first chapter of Sefer Yeshayahu (1:4), which we read on the Shabbat before Tisha B’Av, the prophet speaks of the people as “*banim mashchitim*” (“corrupt children”) – describing them as God’s “children” despite the grave sins of which they were guilty.

This debate between Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehuda perhaps sheds light on their debate regarding Moshe’s shattering the tablets. According to Rabbi Yehuda, the worship of the golden calf marked the “shattering” of the special bond between God and *Benei Yisrael*; they were no longer worthy of being called His “children,” of having a unique relationship with Him, and so Moshe acted correctly in shattering the stone tablets, signifying the destruction of the nation’s bond with the Almighty. Rabbi Meir, however, maintained that even after the sin of the golden calf, *Benei Yisrael* retained their stature as God’s “children”; their unique relationship with God remained intact. In his view, the bond between God and His people cannot be “shattered,” even by the worship of a graven image. Therefore, Rabbi Meir perhaps felt that God did not approve of Moshe’s decision to break the tablets, as they should have been kept intact even after the sin of the golden calf – because the bond between God and *Benei Yisrael* always remains intact, even after we’ve failed and we’ve disappointed Him.

Wednesday

Towards the beginning of Parashat Eikev, Moshe tells *Benei Yisrael* of the rewards they will receive for faithfully observing God’s laws, including, “there shall not be an infertile man or woman, also among your animals” (7:14).

The Gemara in Masekhet Bekhorot (44b) cites Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi as interpreting this verse as a promise that one would not be “infertile” in the sense of not having students to teach, and that his prayers will not be “infertile” in the sense of being unanswered, as they will instead yield the desired results. These blessings are earned, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi taught, only “*bi-behemtekha*” (“among your animals”), which he explains to mean, “if you make yourself like an animal.” According to *Tosafot*, this refers to humility, not demanding special honor and respect, expecting no more recognition than that which is generally accorded to animals.

The Tolna Rebbe finds it significant that this statement was made specifically by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, who, as we know from other passages in the Talmud, excelled in this quality of disregard for personal honor. The Gemara in Masekhet Ketubot (77b) tells that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi would surround himself with “*ba’alei ra’atan*” – patients stricken with the most severe forms of leprosy – and teach them, confident that the merit of Torah instruction would protect him from this contagious illness. The Tolna Rebbe suggests reading this account allegorically, to mean that Rabbi Yehoshua would work with those on the lowest spiritual levels, those who have become distant from Torah like lepers who are kept far away from the rest of society. Rabbi Yehoshua sought to bring Torah to all Jews, to help everyone he could, without concern for his own honor and reputation. He could have earned more prestige and acclaim by teaching top-tier students, but he was not interested in prestige and acclaim, and so he set out to bring the beauty and wisdom of Torah to anybody he could, including the “*ba’alei ra’atan*,” those furthest from Torah knowledge and observance.

Elsewhere, in Masekhet Kiddushin (30a), the Gemara tells that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was once seen throwing a cloth over his head, rather than putting on a proper head covering, in his rush to teach his grandson. In his excitement and fervor to teach elementary Torah material to his young grandchild, Rabbi Yehoshua hurried out the door without worrying about giving a dignified appearance.

Fittingly, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi taught the importance of making oneself “like an animal,” of having no interest in honor and prestige. He emphasized that the key to “fertility” – to being productive, accomplished, and having our wishes fulfilled – is pristine sincerity, living our lives with the sole desire to bring glory to our Creator, and not to bring glory to ourselves.

Thursday

The *haftara* for Parashat Eikev, which is taken from Sefer Yeshayahu (49:14-51:3), begins with a depiction of Jerusalem crying, “The Lord has forsaken me!” – referring to *Am Yisrael*’s perception that the destruction and exile marked God’s permanent rejection of them. God responds to this cry by rhetorically asking if a mother would ever forsake her newborn infant, and then says, “Even if these shall be forsaken – I shall never forsake you!” The prophet assures the nation that even if we could imagine a mother cruelly abandoning her young child, we should be unable to imagine God forsaking His beloved nation. In other words, there is even less of a possibility of God abandoning *Am Yisrael* than there is of a mother abandoning her newborn baby.

The Gemara, in Masekhet Berakhot (32b), offers a different interpretation of this verse, whereby it depicts an exchange between God and *Am Yisrael*. In response to the people’s fears that they are permanently forsaken, God assured them that He would never forget their devoted service to Him in the desert. They then expressed their fears that if this is the case, that God never forgets their devotion in the desert, then this means He would also never forget the sins they committed in the desert – specifically, the sin of the golden calf. God responded, “*Gam eileh tishkachna*” – that He would, in fact, forget about that tragic mistake. *Am Yisrael* then feared that if God forgets the golden calf, He might also forget *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, the Revelation at Sinai, when they proclaimed their unbridled commitment to Him. God replied by guaranteeing to always remember that great moment of devotion. And thus this verse should be read as, “Although I will forget these” – the sin of the golden calf – “I will never forget you” – *Benei Yisrael*’s moment of greatness, when they proclaimed their commitment to God and His Torah. This reading of the verse appears also in *Targum Yonatan*’s translation.

Very often, people in a relationship – whether it’s within a family, a friendship, or any other bond between two people – focus more attention on each other’s mistakes than they do on what the other does right. The “golden calf” – the indiscretions and moments of neglect or betrayal – tend to take center stage in the other’s mind, while the expressions of devotion and fealty are overlooked. We frequently take for granted the other’s meeting our expectations, and feel embittered and resentful over the handful of occasions when we were disappointed. The exchange between God and *Am Yisrael* depicted by the Gemara perhaps teaches us to view our relationships from the precise opposite perspective – to forget the disappointments, and always remember, appreciate and respect everything else. Just as God remembers our moments of devotion and is prepared to forgive our moments of failure, so must we focus our attention on what the people around us do right, and be quick to forgive that which they do wrong.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted the Gemara’s comments in Masekhet Berakhot (32b) interpreting the verses from Yeshayahu’s prophecy read as the *haftara* for Parashat Eikev: “Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, and God has forgotten me!’ Does a woman forget her young child, to love the fruit of her womb? Even if these are forgotten, I will not forget you” (49:14-15). The Gemara explains this to mean that God assured *Benei Yisrael* after the destruction that He would forever remember their devotion in the wilderness. The people then feared that this meant He would also forever remember the grave sin of the golden calf which they committed in the wilderness. God then said, “This I will forget” – promising to forget this sin – and they responded by expressing fear that He might then also forget the Revelation at Sinai, when they enthusiastically proclaimed their unwavering and unconditional commitment to obey God’s laws. He then assured them that although He would forget the golden calf, He would never forget their declaration of loyalty at the time of *Matan Torah*.

*Chatam Sofer* (*Torat Moshe*, Parashat Ha’azinu) offers a creative explanation for why the Gemara here connects the events of *Matan Torah* and the golden calf. When God informed the people that He would forget the sin of the golden calf, they figured that this was because this sin resulted from a rash, irrational decision reached frantically in a moment of panic, when Moshe did not return from atop Mount Sinai at the expected time. The people assumed that the sin of the golden calf was forgivable because it did not reflect a deep-seated rejection of God, and was rather the product of a momentary lapse. However, they then feared, if this is the case, then God might just as well forget the great moment of *Matan Torah*. After all, when Moshe informed them of God’s desire to forge a covenant with them, they quickly and instinctively pronounced, “*Na’aseh ve-nishma*” – “We will do and we will hear” (Shemot 24:7), without giving it a second thought, not even for a brief moment. And thus if they were excused for the mistake of the golden calf because this mistake was made rashly and impulsively, then they also cannot be credited for pledging their commitment at the time of *Matan Torah*, which was also done rashly and impulsively.

God therefore assured them that He would always remember their devotion expressed at *Matan Torah*, despite forgetting their betrayal at the sin of the golden calf. He knows that the rash decision to make the golden calf stemmed from a temporary lack of clear, rational thinking, whereas the rash decision to pledge commitment to the Torah stemmed from a genuine love for God and sincere desire to fulfill His will and build a meaningful relationship with Him. And thus He “forgot” the golden calf but will never forget *Matan Torah*.

Quick, unthinking decisions are made either due to impatience, or due to a deeply-ingrained conviction that obviates the need for careful thought and consideration. Sometimes, we act on impulse because we lack the patience to carefully and thoroughly explore our options. But on other occasions, we act on impulse because there really is nothing to think about, because the matter at stake is a value that has become fully internalized and absorbed into the very fiber of our beings. In *Benei Yisrael*’s case, their love for God naturally and instinctively drove them to pledge fealty to His laws even before hearing what was entailed; any hesitation or second guessing would have reflected a deficiency in their love and devotion to God. Their worship of a golden calf, by contrast, reflected not a deep-seated passion for idolatry, but rather impatience in deciding upon a course of action in response to Moshe’s delayed arrival. Our challenge is to inculcate within ourselves the Torah’s values and ideals to the point where our commitment is second nature, when we are drawn to observe the Torah without even a second thought, while avoiding rash, impulsive decisions about matters that do not relate to our deep-seated convictions.

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